

One Punch, One Kill

The karate legacy of Shuri, Okinawa:
Part three – Sokuichi Gibu Sensei

Sokuichi Gibu Sensei is well recognised in Okinawa, the small island province far off Japan's south coast known as the birthplace of karate. Not only is he recognised in the business community, but the master of Shorin-ryu is renowned for his dedication and skill when it comes to both karate and kobudo, the ancient art of wielding traditional weaponry such as the *nunchaku*. During his recent visit to the Ryukyu Kingdom (as Okinawa was traditionally known) earlier this year, Mike Clarke interviewed four prominent teachers of Shorin-ryu, the fighting art that developed in Shuri, the royal capital of Okinawa. Here, he reveals what he discovered about the Okinawan karate way via a meeting with Gibu Sensei.

STORY BY MIKE CLARKE



Of all the meetings I had with senior senseis from Shorin-ryu on my recent visit to Okinawa, trying to arrange a meeting with Sokuichi Gibu Sensei turned out to be the most difficult. This was not due to any reluctance on his part – the man simply never stops for long enough in his busy day to sit and be interviewed. From dawn to dusk, his daily schedule would frighten even

honour too. Unfortunately, my own hectic schedule did not allow me to visit his Butokukan dojo during my stay in Okinawa, but thanks to an introduction by John Spence Sensei, the North American *Shibu-cho* for the Butokukan, a meeting with the master was made possible.

Born in Chinen Village in Southern Okinawa in 1941, Gibu Sensei began training in Goju-ryu karate as a 14-year-old boy. A year later, however,

taught karate ever since. Parting company with the Shorinkan organisation in 1991, Gibu Sensei has concentrated on preserving the kata of Shorin-ryu and passing on the ways of Okinawan karate with integrity. Although well known within the Okinawan karate community and abroad, Gibu has deliberately stepped back from 'collecting affiliates', preferring instead to avoid the path of rampant commercialism that many others have taken. Today, the Butokukan has few affiliate dojos, just a couple in Okinawa and *shibu* (branch) dojos in America, Argentina and South Africa.

I met with Gibu Sensei and his son Makoto in the coffee shop of the Pacific Hotel in Naha. He had just left one business meeting and was on his way to another, but showed no sign of being rushed. On the contrary, he was relaxed and calm, a quiet man who engaged me with a warm smile, a friendly handshake and a focused gaze. I was struck immediately by Gibu's humility and gentle manner – traits that were just as evident in his son, himself a karateka of some standing.

"One day, I saw a karate demonstration and I was fascinated by it; it attracted me straight away." – Gibu Sensei

the busiest of businessmen; nevertheless, in spite of such a schedule, Gibu Sensei still finds time for karate. Like so many senseis of his generation, karate is far more than just something he 'does'; it's part and parcel of who he is. That he found any time at all to meet with me and be interviewed was not only a pleasure for me, but a real

he changed to Shorin-ryu and became a student of Shugoro Nakazato Sensei at the Shorinkan dojo in Aja. There he remained for the next 35 years, eventually becoming the first student to be promoted to 8th Dan at the Shorinkan. In 1979, Gibu Sensei established his own dojo, the Butokukan in Urasoe, just north of Naha, where he has

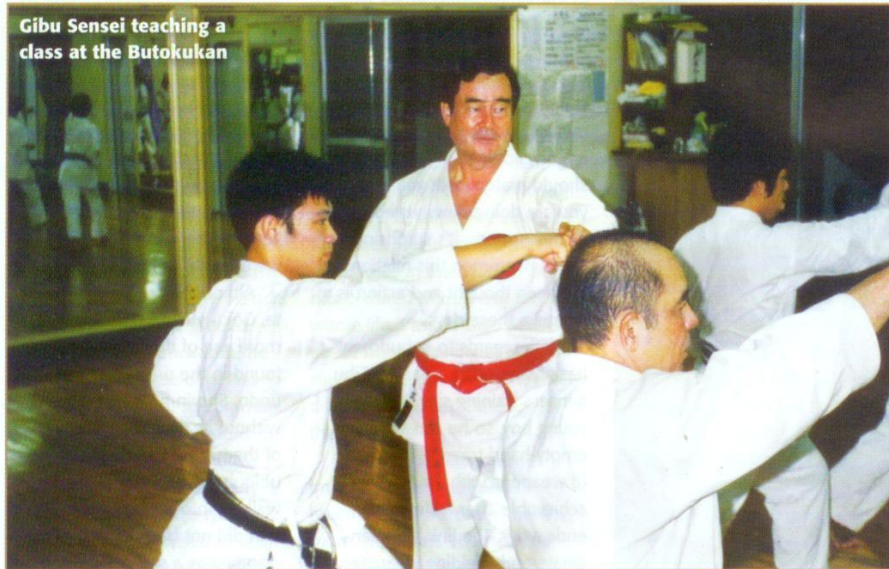


Preparing for a traditional Okinawan festival

We were joined by Miguel Da Luz, a long time resident in Okinawa, editor of the small but prestigious *Okinawa Karate News* and a tireless worker in the promotion of Okinawan martial culture. Miguel and I had worked together on interviews during previous visits to the island as he is well known and respected within the martial arts community. With Gibu Sensei speaking no English, and my Japanese being only slightly better than that, Miguel was a very welcome participant in our discussion.

Our conversation began with me asking Gibu Sensei why he began training; what was it about karate that fascinated him? "I wanted to be strong. Some people begin to learn karate because they are bullied, but I did not experience anything like that," he told me. "One day, I saw a karate demonstration and I was fascinated by it; it attracted me straight away. I was only a young boy but what I saw made me feel like I wanted to be like the

Gibu Sensei teaching a class at the Butokukan



karateka in the demonstration. Of course, when I started I soon found out that training in karate was hard work. Training times at Nakazato Sensei's dojo were twice a day – in the day time and again at night time – and I was training in both classes. The main training was in kata, but we also trained a lot in *hojo-undo* [strength and conditioning exercises], particularly the *machiwara* [*makiwara* or striking post]. We also did a lot of training to toughen our bodies, especially the *tanden* [abdomen], by using a bamboo pole. We did a lot of sparring too, but this was not a part of the 'formal' training, it was something students could do after normal training if they wanted to. My sparring partner at that time was Tadashi Yamashita,

who later moved to America and became quite famous after he taught *nunchaku* techniques to Bruce Lee. You see, as well as the karate training, we also trained in *kobudo* [weaponry arts]."

I mentioned having met Yamashita Sensei in San Diego back in 1989, and also my meeting with Nakazato Sensei when I visited the Shorinkan dojo in Aja in 2005. Those particular meetings were nowhere near as cordial as this one and I told Gibu Sensei how scary Nakazato Sensei could be; he nodded gently in agreement and smiled.

My research for this interview had led me to believe that Gibu Sensei wished to return the kata of Shorin-ryu to the way they were performed by Choshin Chibana Sensei. I asked him

what success he'd had in this – and his reply should serve as a reminder to all those who would rely on the information found on the Internet. Gibu Sensei's aim is in fact not to return the kata to the forms practised by Chibana Sensei, but, having had them handed down to him correctly and intact, to maintain and preserve the kata as they are. From Sokon Matsumura to Anko Itosu, Choshin Chibana and Shugoro Nakazato Sensei, and now to Gibu Sensei, his aim is to preserve the 'core' kata of Shorin-ryu and to pass them on to the next generation unchanged.

The kata at the heart of Shorin-ryu are *Naihanchin* (*Tekki*), *Passai* (*Bassai*) and *Kusanku*. Gibu Sensei explained to me that there are a number of variations with some kata and that *Passai* and *Kusanku* were good examples of this. How these variations came about could be for a number of reasons and, as Gibu Sensei explained, the kata performance reflects the strategy of the performer. So, for example, if in the mind of the performer the opponent is tall, then the height and range of certain techniques would alter in the performance of the kata to take this into account. I was relieved to hear this coming from a teacher of Gibu Sensei's standing, as it echoed exactly my own philosophy; that is, what you are physically doing in your karate should match what you think you are doing. Now, as obvious as that sounds, it's surprising how uncommon this relationship between thought and action is in karateka these days.

With regards to kobudo, this has always been a part of Gibu Sensei's training since he was a young boy, so he can slip from empty-hand training to the use of weapons with an ease only achievable after a lifetime of endeavour. The link between karate and wielding weapons

became evident when our conversation touched upon the fighting strategies preserved in the different kata. *Passai-sho*, for example, takes as its basic premise from being attacked by someone using a *bo* (staff).

Again, it was reassuring to hear this information coming from an Okinawan sensei of Gibu's standing. I first learnt of the tactics preserved in this kata many years ago during a conversation over dinner with Shotokan's famed Hirokazu Kanazawa Sensei. At the time, my appreciation for the role kata training played in my karate education was not as well understood as it is now, and I was only just beginning to appreciate kata's deeper purpose.

Gibu Sensei added that the tactics and techniques found in *Passai-sho* were also calculated for use in the dark. At the Butokukan dojo, and within the various shibu dojos around the world, Okinawan kobudo is preserved through the use of six weapons: the *bo* or *kon* (staff), *sai* (iron forks), *tonfa* (baton), *kama* (sickle), *nunchaku* and *eku* (oar). The kata and use of these weapons were incorporated into the training at the Shorinkan dojo and have been handed down by Nakazato Sensei. He was taught how to use them by a number of teachers, in particular Seiro Tonaka and, later, Masami Chinen. Gibu Sensei treats the kobudo kata he practises and teaches in the same careful manner he passes on the kata of karate, keeping them exactly as they were taught to him.

Although the karate of Naha-te, Goju-ryu and Uechi-ryu make more use of the tools (*kigu*) found in the practice of *hojo-undo*, Shorin-ryu karate is not without its own use of many of them. The *machiwara* is ubiquitous, and I can't recall ever walking into an Okinawan dojo that did not have at least one standing as a silent witness to the



Gibu Sensei directs John Spence's kata practice at the Butokukan

training that has gone on there. I'm not sure you can say you're training in Okinawan karate if you don't face the machiwara on a regular basis. But besides this icon of karate, there are a huge number of tools and devices used by Okinawan karateka to help condition their bodies for the rigours of karate. Gibu Sensei revealed a few that he used a lot as a young man.

"Of course we hit the machiwara almost every day, but as well as that we had old rice bags that we filled with sand and we used them to condition our shins, by kicking into them over and over again. We also used *tatami* [mats] to kick into

on conditioning, but then learnt that unlike some other Shorin-ryu schools, at the Butokukan senior students regularly don protective gear (*boku*) and spar with full force. Even with protection, such training takes a good deal of conditioning in order to withstand the constant heavy impact involved. According to Gibu Sensei, this type of training caught the interest of the Kyokushin karateka in Okinawa, who have visited the Butokukan to study their methods. Also, I was told that it was a student from the Butokukan who first demonstrated the strength of a conditioned shin by demolishing a baseball bat. So impressed

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with our toes, and would go to the beach to kick into the sand with our toes there, too. We also practised walking around on our tiptoes to strengthen our legs."

I had to smile when I heard that, because on my first visit to Okinawa in February 1984, I would regularly follow Morio Higaonna Sensei through the streets of Naha on his morning run and the last few kilometres back to the dojo was often 'walked' on our tiptoes!

"We sometimes used young cherry trees to condition our arms and shins too, using them like *ude kitae* [a post set in the ground that is repeatedly struck with the arms and legs]. These days, this kind of training is not so common. But we have the *chi-ishi* [stone weights] and a few other tools; although we don't use as many tools as you use in Goju-ryu."

I was a little surprised to learn that so much time was spent

were they by this, that many Kyokushin dojos on the island have included a similar display in their own demonstrations.

All of the senseis I'd arranged to meet with were born either before or during World War II and are now in their late 60s or early 70s. They had each experienced great hardships growing up in the austere reality of the post-war years and the occupation of their homeland by the American military. Still, for all the adversity, they each found something of great value in their karate, which has endured throughout their whole life. I asked Gibu Sensei about karate training at different stages in life and how it might differ depending on the age of the karateka.

"As you get older, the importance of *junbi-undo* [warming up] becomes more and more important. The need for 'explosive' power also becomes



more important as you don't have the kind of body that can continue moving the same way as a young body can," he said. "So, it's important to think about the idea of *ikken hissatsu* – 'one punch, one kill'. When you are young you should train hard, a lot; every day, in fact. You can't do this as you get older, so you have to do this kind of training while you are young. Also, as you grow older, you have to adapt your training to your age and health, and not try to continue as if you are still young. It is important, too, that your *junbi-*

undo and *hojo-undo* training be related to your karate training."

Before bringing our conversation to a close, I wanted to investigate a little further why Gibu Sensei has deliberately kept the Butokukan school of Shorin-ryu small. So I asked him what he looked for when accepting a new student. Like other dojos in Okinawa, local children and adults are free to approach the dojo and apply for instruction, but if karateka from another school of Shorin-ryu or another school of karate – Goju-ryu, for example – want to

become a student, they have a little bit of explaining to do.

"First of all," Gibu Sensei explained, "I want to know their karate history, which type of karate they are training in at present, and who is their sensei. Then I want to know what their reason for coming to my dojo is; is it just to learn something 'extra' to add to their existing training, or do they have a real wish to learn the Butokukan way [technique]? It is possible to get an idea of what

dojo and its affiliates is clearly looking bright, grounded in tradition and yet mindful of the here-and-now. Gibu Sensei was open to the idea of growth, but not at any cost. His feelings regarding expansion were strongly linked to his desire to keep the spirit of karate within the Butokukan as it is now, and he would not want to expand if that spirit was in danger of being lost.

My scheduled hour with Gibu Sensei was almost up, and



Gibu Sensei in business mode

a person is like by learning who their teacher is and how long they have been with them. If I don't know their teacher, then I ask who their teacher's teacher was."

This reminded me of the significant difference in the way karate is approached by those who seek to earn a living from it; where commercial instructors will accept whoever is prepared to pay, more traditional sensei still work to preserve a sense of dignity. For them there is not the rush to make money or the compromise that comes with depending on students for your livelihood. Still, Gibu Sensei was not 'against' people earning a living this way. He said, "That's a choice for them." I got the distinct impression he didn't think it was a particularly good idea.

The future for the Butokukan

he would soon have to leave to attend another business meeting. While we finished our drinks and tucked in to the last of the cheesecake, the tables were turned a little bit, with Gibu Sensei asking me about my life and karate's role in it. As I answered his questions as best I could, I was sorry our meeting was drawing to a close, but I knew, even as we spoke, exchanged business cards and posed for photographs, this would not be my last meeting with this master of Shorinryu. Next time I'm in Okinawa I hope to see him again, for karate senseis like Sokuichi Gibu transcend the barriers of style and affiliation, and from such teachers it is possible to learn things of far more value in life than an ability to kick and punch. **BLITZ**